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ABSTRACT

Four Latina migrant mothers who traveled with their families to pick tomatoes in northeastern Pennsylvania were interviewed as part of an oral history project. The women came from Mexico and Guatemala, were 22-37 years old, and had levels of formal education that ranged from "very little" to 9 years. They were interviewed about the goals and expectations of their childhood as defined by family and culture, the realities of their adult lives as migrant mothers, and their expectations for their children's future. The telling of their stories encouraged the mothers to explore the impact of the values and norms of Latina and migrant cultures, as well as family commitment to education, on their own limited life choices. The women's stories also depict the contradictory values that they and their children experience, including differences in sex role expectations between their own and the dominant culture, and the choice between continuing one's education in order to seek careers outside of farmwork or taking advantage of the immediate availability of work and the opportunity to make money. Many Latina migrant mothers would like to help lift their children out of the migrant life style. The concept of parental involvement should be expanded to include ways educators can empower these mothers to negotiate the cultural and life-style stumbling blocks in their and their children's way. Includes interview excerpts and an oral history outline. (Author/SV)

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CHAPTER 18

Voices of Latina Migrant Mothers in Rural Pennsylvania[1]

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Latina migrant mothers who traveled with their families to pick tomatoes in rural northeastern Pennsylvania were interviewed about the goals and expectations of their childhood as defined by family and culture, the reality of their adult lives as migrant mothers, and their expectations for their children's future. The telling of their stories encouraged the mothers to explore the impact of the values and norms of Latina and migrant cultures, as well as family commitment to education, on their own limited life choices. Their stories are shared here to provide a resource for teachers and administrators in the United States who are responsible for educating migrant children from Latina cultures.

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Introduction

Most of the farmworkers who arrive in northeastern Pennsylvania each summer to pick tomatoes work their way from the South (Florida or Texas) to the North and back again. Poor economic conditions at home and the need to travel to remain employed characterize

[1]The presentation of her oral history findings has been supported in part by the Pennsylvania Humanities Council, a statewide organization funded partially by the National Endowment for the Humanities. It does not necessarily express the views of the Council or the Endowment.

the lifestyle of these migrant workers. They travel through the East Coast states, taking on whatever work they can find. Many of these workers are citizens or legal residents of the United States or have documented permission to seek employment in this country. However, many Mexicans and Central Americans continue to cross the border without the U.S. government's permission in order to search for economic opportunities. Some of these undocumented workers also find their way to Pennsylvania to pick crops.

Among the farmworker groups representing varying points of origins, lifestyles, and legal statuses are families with school-age and preschool-age children. These families arrive in northeastern Pennsylvania in late July or early August and stay until late September to hand-harvest a multimillion-dollar fresh market tomato crop. The children of these families attend a special summer school program provided by Pennsylvania Migrant Education and are integrated into local district schools when the regular school year begins. The mothers of these children interact often with staff from Pennsylvania Migrant Education and other farmworker support agencies to plan their children's school attendance and to secure other needed services (e.g., health care, transportation, supplemental food). During these interactions, Latina mothers often have expressed concerns that their children are losing their cultural heritage by living in the United States. In an attempt to help these mothers preserve their heritage for their children, Dr. Stephanie Bressler, an assistant professor of political science at King's College, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, and Barbara Hludzik, Northeast (Pennsylvania) Migrant Education Program, conducted an oral history project during the summer of 1994. As the project progressed, the researchers chose to focus on the mothers themselves, encouraging them to tell their stories in their own language (i.e., Spanish) of growing up in and now raising their children in the migrant lifestyle. The telling of their stories encouraged mothers to explore the impact of cultural values and family commitment toward education on their own life choices and hopes for their children. Their stories are shared here to provide important insights for teachers and administrators in the United States who are responsible for educating migrant children from Latina cultures.

Methodology

Four Latina migrant mothers ranging in age from 22 to 37 years were interviewed for the oral history project. Two of the mothers, Rosa and Elia, consider the United States their permanent home. One mother, Rigoberta (not her real name), grew up in Guatemala but moved to Mexico with her family to flee war at home; she plans to go back to Guatemala soon but hopes to return to the United States with her family. The fourth mother,

Griselda (not her real name), whose husband recently secured a job in the meat packing industry, moved her family from a farm labor camp into private housing. She is unsure how long her family will stay in northeastern Pennsylvania and talks about returning to Mexico. At the time of the interviews, Rosa, Elia, and Rigoberta resided with their families in grower-provided farm labor camps. These camps are located in isolated areas and consist of cinder-block barracks that are almost always overcrowded. While the mothers' level of formal education ranged from "very little" to 9 years, all four were articulate and comfortable with the interview process, which fit in well with the familiar oral tradition of their Latina culture.

Although the concept of oral history implies a focus on interviewees' recollections of their past, the mothers were also asked to reflect on their present lives and on the future of their children. Each mother participated in a series of interviews. Interview questions were planned and organized to solicit each mother's thoughts on the interrelationships among her own childhood as defined by family and culture, the reality of her adult life as a mother, and her expectations for herself and her children in the future. (See appendix at the end of this chapter for outline from which interviewer generated questions in Spanish.)

While carefully planned oral history is accepted as a scholarly approach to collecting information about individuals' lives, the researchers acknowledge the subjective nature of this information and the limitations of its use as evidence to generalize about a group of people. However, the observations made by the women interviewed for this project suggest values, norms, and ways of understanding life that are likely shared by many other Latina migrant women. Their reflections, supported by the researchers' observations of migrant families collected during the past 10 years, are offered here not as conclusive evidence of the lifestyle of all Latina migrant mothers but as a primary source of information about how some of these mothers view their own and their children's lives.

Findings and Discussion

Latina migrant mothers represent a unique population. These women grew up in a rural Latina culture with traditional differentiation and stratification of male and female roles. The women were socialized, as were their mothers, to be primarily responsible for domestic and child-rearing tasks and to respect the authority of men. Reflecting on her father's advice that terminated her schooling after only 3 years, Rigoberta shared this:

> *Cuando yo entré en la escuela, a mí me gustaba mucho la escuela....* When I started school, I liked school a lot. But my father said, "It isn't going to do you any good to be studying or earning good grades

> because you are *niñas* (little girls), my daughter. You are going to grow up. You are going to look for husbands and what I am going to give you isn't going to be good for anything." *Mi hermano* (my brother), the one who is younger than me, they gave him schooling. But what happened is that he didn't want to study. And therefore, I liked school, but my father only gave me permission to go for 3 years.

Latina migrant mothers continue to uphold many of the traditional roles and values of this rural culture, as Elia observed in the following:

> *Yo enseño a mi niña cosas de trabajo de limpiar....* I teach my girl housework and harvest and how things are done for when she's married so that she can help her husband. My oldest son, Joe, goes with my husband to move trucks when there's no school and to help him with what he needs help in.

While Latina migrant families mostly follow traditional gender roles, the economic uncertainty with which these families constantly live dictates that mothers work in the fields or in related jobs. Migrant women do nearly every kind of farm labor, including harvesting crops and sorting and packing produce (Farmworker Women Speak Out, 1994, p. 2). In addition, Latina migrant women handle all domestic responsibilities. Their husbands rarely help with household chores and child care. The double burden experienced by these women is reflected in their comments.

> *Está más dura la vida de la mujer....* The life of a woman is harder because she has to go to the field to work and has to cook and do everything. Later the man goes out with other men.

> *Para una mujer, ese trabajo es pesado....* The work is heavy for a woman. But when one wants to work, well, one has to put up with it.

> *Entonces tú trabajas todo el día en la labor....* Then you work (as a woman) all day in the fields, and then in the afternoon, at night, you have to take care of the children, take them to the clinic, to the hospital when they get sick. This is always one's job (as a woman).

At the same time, these women are surrounded by and work and live in mainstream American culture, in which the changes in gender roles are more visible. They see women working in jobs that they consider men's work (i.e., doctors), and they see men assuming primary responsibility for caring for children (i.e., day care workers). Their children participate in mainstream culture in school where men's and women's roles are less differentiated, but both migrant mothers and children are expected to remain part of a more traditional culture at home. The children experience

many contradictions, which sometimes makes it difficult for them to learn appropriate behaviors.

As services for migrants and their families are further developed, mothers are encouraged by agency workers to participate in public activities such as parental involvement groups. Interaction with educational staff is almost always the responsibility of mothers. Fathers almost never play a role in their children's education. According to Rosa:

> *Una madre siendo migrante tiene que cuidar sus hijos....* A mother who is a migrant must take care of her children because no one is going to take care of them for her, and she must see that they can go to school, grow up, and do something better than their mother and father could do.

But at home—in the farm labor camps—these women live in a male-dominated culture where their husbands' jealousy and suspicions often means that they must ask permission to take part in these and almost all other activities. Rigoberta recalled that as a young woman recently arrived in the United States, she was obligated to seek her father's permission before speaking to or being seen with the man who was later to become her husband. Another mother worried that her husband would be annoyed that she was wearing shorts when being photographed as part of the oral history project. Yet this same mother had convinced her husband to allow her to accept a temporary job at the summer school where she hoped she would be in a better position to encourage her children to work hard in school. As a result of living in two cultures, migrant mothers and their children often experience role and value conflicts. The changes these women see in their lifetimes as exemplified by the roles and statuses of women are significant. They are changes that more often evolve over several generations in other parts of society.

While the oral histories provide much evidence of the impact of Latina culture on the mothers' lives, the women's stories reveal that the migrant lifestyle has a more direct influence on how these families live their lives. A culture of migrancy has previously been identified by ethnographers who report common behavioral patterns among migrants of different ethnic/cultural backgrounds (Prewitt-Diaz, Trotter, & Rivera, 1990). Low earnings and the need to travel to remain employed heavily influence this lifestyle. Elia reflected:

> *Desde que yo fui nacida....* Ever since I was born my father and mother always have traveled to the jobs. Now I come to different places. I'm still a migrant.

As is true for most migrants, the mothers began working when very young and continue to work now. Griselda recalled:

> *Tenía como catorce años y trabajaba yo en los tomates....* I was 14 when I worked in tomatoes, getting up very early at four in the morning to make the lunch to carry to the fields. Afterwards, we would pick there all day.

While their parents sometimes verbalized support for education, these women's schooling was regularly disrupted and eventually abbreviated by the need to travel. School was viewed as competing for the time of young girls whose work in the fields could supplement meager family incomes or whose help was sorely needed by their own mothers, who cared for large families of 13 or 14 children. Migrant families' ambivalence toward education has been well documented by earlier studies (Reul, 1974; Friedland & Nelkin, 1971; Coles, 1970). The migrant mothers interviewed for the oral history assumed adult roles at a young age as worker and surrogate mother to younger brothers and sisters. The mothers remembered:

> *Todos trabajábamos a la hora de ir por la escuela....* All of us worked until it was time to go to school. They came to find us at work and took us to school, and Papa was angry that they put us there.

> *Yo les ayudé mucho a mis padres también....* I helped my parents a lot also. I was growing up, went to school. Lots of times I couldn't go to school, because I had to stay and help my mother with my brothers and sisters that were much younger.

Distracted by their families' demands and frustrated by the frequent disruptions in their education, all of the mothers interviewed left school at an early age. All expressed dissatisfaction and, at times, embarrassment with their lack of education. They viewed their failure to finish education as a major factor in their continuing inability to leave the migrant lifestyle and improve their lives.

> *No van a ser iguales como yo que no entiendo....* They (my children) are not going to be like me—like one who does not understand.

Out of respect for their own parents, however, these women blame themselves for their failure to continue their education. When asked whether it was her decision to leave school, Elia recalled:

> *Se me hace que yo, fue mi problema....* I think it was me, it was my problem. I wanted to quit really. I didn't pay attention to my mother and father telling me to go. I just didn't want to go and they didn't force me to go either, so I didn't. For my mother, I think it was better

because I could help her with the children; maybe not, maybe she did want me to go. Well I don't know, I was very young then.

The mothers see their children's need to get an education reflected in their own lack of education. They see themselves as key to their children's ability to continue their education. While all of the mothers married and had several children at a young age, they decided not to have as many children as their mothers had. They viewed limiting family size as allowing them more time and energy to devote to helping their children.

Ya me puse a pensar.... I thought to myself that the fewer children I have, the more chances I would have to help them become something. If I have a familia grande (large family), then I am not going to be able to help them as much.

The mothers' limiting of family size is consistent with the considerable decrease in family size within a generation observed by Gonzales in his study of Mexican and Mexican American farmworkers (1985, p. 125). But the mothers' decisions to limit family size often conflicted with their strong religious backgrounds (i.e., Roman Catholic or Evangelical) and were rarely welcomed by their husbands, who take pride in having many children. Making such reproductive choices, which for two mothers involved seeking tubal ligations, often pits the traditional value of large families against the more modern value of limiting family size to permit mothers both to contribute to family resources and to better use existing resources to support children. They observed that their own mothers were exhausted by meeting the survival needs of a large family (e.g., cooking and washing diapers) and had little time to contribute to family income or to encourage their children's education. But increasingly, Latina migrant mothers are assuming more control over decisions concerning family size and are resolving conflicts in favor of fewer children and the potential to give more time and attention to their children as they grow older.

The mothers recognized that the greatest impediment to their children's chances to complete a high school education was posed by the stop-and-start nature of their schooling caused by the need to travel. They often blamed themselves for these disruptions, as Rigoberta did in the following:

El bien es para ellos porque más después cuando crezcan.... It is good for the children [to stop migrating] because when they grow up, they might say, "It is my mother's fault that I don't know how to read or write." I prefer to have my children in school so they will learn. Like here, they learn English.

The mothers talk often about plans to stop traveling if they see it is doing harm to their children, but they seldom carry out these plans. They know in

reality that few migrant women (or men) have the freedom to make such economic decisions. Because these families are poor, there is little choice but to continue to "travel to the jobs." One of the mothers interviewed actually did refuse to pack up her children and travel north with her husband one year, but economics and a desire not to split up her family resulted in her return to migrating the following year.

The constant moving from one place to another means that families' possessions, friends, and familial support networks are left behind.

> *Siempre cuando uno tiene que mover....* When one has to move, one has to leave things behind because you can't take everything to where you are going, and these are the hard things, because when you go to another place, you have to buy them.

> *Se mueve, que se queda y así....* One moves, something stays behind. My mother right now does not know my children. She only sees them in pictures.

In many ways, Latina migrant families experience a feeling of uprootedness. During the rare times they are not working or waiting to be called to work, families find few opportunities to engage in familiar social activities. Elia complained:

> *Se fastidia de estar en los campos....* You get frustrated being at the camps, working all week. Saturday and Friday come and you want to go out and have fun or something. When you're around here in the jobs, there are no *bailes* (dances), nothing of the sort. What we (Mexicans) like most is to dance. You have to go to the movies when they pay and you have money.

But most important for the mothers interviewed, moving from place to place means their children will go to one school for a short period of time and then move on to another school where they will need to adjust to new teachers and make new friends. When asked, "Do your children like school?", migrant mothers, unlike most mainstream U.S. mothers, respond, "Do you mean *this* (current) school or school in general?"

Migrating also means that children live with their parents in farm labor camps. These camps are rarely set up to accommodate families, which means that parents and children often stay together in a single room. One mother observed:

> *Estamos en el mismo cuarto....* [The children, my husband, and I] are in the same room. It's not like my daughter can have her own room to play Barbie. But I always accommodate them good.

Little privacy is afforded to families living in camps. Facilities are shared with other camp occupants.

> *Es duro porque uno ya siente cansada ya en su edad que tiene....* It's hard [living in the camps] because one feels tired at one's age, and the bathrooms are outside, the showers are outside, *everything* is outside.

Mothers also worry that their young sons will be influenced negatively by other young male workers in the camps, some of whom are themselves teenagers who have already abandoned their education to work in the fields. Elia reported:

> *Yo regaño con el grandecito mío que no quiero....* I scold my oldest son that I don't want him to bother with them, because they think differently than a boy of 13. At times they play cards, they play dominoes, they drink, they smoke...and he can learn things from them.

And in a culture where marriage and childbearing at an early age are common, mothers also worry about the impact of camp life on their young daughters. Rosa advised:

> *Está bien tener tus hijas pero si tú te sabes llegar con ellas, darles consejos....* It's okay having your daughters [in the camp] but only if you know how to reach them, give them advice...and believe them because sometimes there will be lies and much gossip. I trust my girls. I communicate well with them, because they are lovely. And it is dangerous to live in the camps because there are many single men, many "lovebirds" as the Americans say.

Latina migrant mothers are similar to mainstream U.S. mothers. They worry about their children's health and education, and they have dreams for their children's futures. They all want children to find jobs outside of "la labor." Migrant mothers' concept of a successful person is someone who speaks good English and has a permanent job outside of "la labor." The mothers shared:

> *Yo no quiero que mis hijos sufran también, como estoy aquí trabajando en la labor....* I don't want my children to suffer like I am working in the fields. Sometimes I suffer because of the heat. I see in my life, what I am going through is tough. I don't want my children to suffer this. I prefer that they study.
>
> I want them to stay in school in order to find a job—an easy one, not a hard one.
>
> I take them to the field so that they learn how hard it is working in the

> field, see the life of farmwork and how warm the ground is. They don't like this and they keep on in school.

One mother referred to careers rather than jobs and shared specific dream careers for each of her children, careers that are clearly mainstream American but reflect traditional gender roles.

> *A Luíz le gusta mecánicas, a Beverly le gusta bookkeeping....* Luíz likes mechanics, and Beverly likes bookkeeping. Beatriz likes modeling, and Vicki a ballerina I guess. Oh, and Johnny wants to be a movie star.

But migrant mothers temper their hopes for their children with resignation to the reality presented by their lifestyle. They are hopeful within a context of powerlessness. This powerlessness has previously been documented by Prewitt-Diaz et al., in their 1990 ethnographic study of migrant families (pp. 74-77). A mother's reflection demonstrated this state:

> In order for my children to finish school, they need me to help them. But I can't think for them. I want the best for them all of the time.
>
> *Pero no se puede, no se puede....* But if it can't be, it can't be.

While discouraged by their lack of education, the mothers also dream about their own futures.

> *Y el rato que ellos están en la escuela, me gustaría yo estar aprendiendo....* While my children are in school, I would like to be learning something for myself. I would like to finish school if I could. I know it's late, but I'd like to finish.
>
> I like to work with children, and I'd like to get a job cutting hair, something different. I see that I would be able to do that well, because I have tried it.
>
> I think that after I finish raising my children, I plan to study a little more and look for a job where I would not be in "la labor."
>
> In the future I would like to stop traveling, buy a house, and stay in Florida. I would like to get my GED and get a good job to see to it that my children don't have to stay in farmwork.

But Latina migrant mothers are also different from mainstream U.S. mothers in significant ways. They follow lives in which role definitions and values and norms of two different cultures (rural Latina and mainstream United States) often collide. The impact of a third (migrant lifestyle) places demands and limitations on what they can do to guide and encourage

their children to realize their dreams of continuing their education, finding a job outside of farmwork, and settling into a permanent location. While these mothers hope that their children's lives will be different from theirs, they express acceptance of their lifestyle with a strong sense of ethnic pride. Elia concluded her interview with the following:

> *Es una vida que no a todas les gustaría....* This is not a life that everyone would like. I see almost no Americanas in this kind of work. But, I am happy because this is the life that God gave to me, a Mexicana. I am happy with the life.

Conclusion

As a result of the many contradictions their families experience, the children of these women receive mixed messages. They feel encouraged to continue their education and seek careers outside of farmwork. Yet the immediate availability of work and the opportunity to make money when the harvest is good are appealing. Putting off this opportunity in order to study, in hopes of finding a job that will help them afford to settle in a permanent location, is a difficult choice to make, and one for which their lifestyle offers little support. Although smaller families and the availability of day-care services have reduced the pressure on young migrant girls to serve as surrogate mothers for younger brothers and sisters, migrant children continue to assume worker roles at an early age. As a result of their working in adult jobs, migrant children are often permitted by parents to make the decision to continue or quit school.

Many Latina migrant mothers are strong women, as evidenced by their courage to leave family and familiar surroundings to try to improve their lives. Most would like to help lift their children out of the migrant lifestyle. They have insight into the many influences in their own lives and their children's that make this difficult, but they also recognize the changes that have occurred in their lifetimes that make this at least possible for their sons and daughters. As reflected in the interviews recorded in S. Beth Atkin's *Voices from the Fields* (1993), an essential difference between many farmworker parents and their children is their children's chance to get an education. Latina migrant mothers need the support of migrant educators to help them find ways to explore productively these new avenues for their children. There are natural alliances to be developed between educators and migrant mothers who share similar goals for their children. The concept of parental involvement should be expanded to include ways educators can empower mothers to find these avenues for their children and negotiate the many cultural and lifestyle stumbling blocks that threaten to get in their way.

While the outcome of the oral history project provides a window on the behaviors and motivations of Latina migrant mothers and their children, the process involved in the mothers' telling their stories is likely more important than the product itself. As Linda Shopes notes in "Oral History in Pennsylvania: A Historiographical Overview" (1993, pp. 450-451), an oral history project such as the one undertaken with Latina migrant mothers is not solely an effort to record their lives at an earlier time, but is also a means of cultivating cultural pride and empowerment. The mothers expressed much pride that they were asked to speak for the record about their own experiences in their honored language rather than have others speak for them. Two mothers agreed to be photographed and all four mothers readily consented to have their stories presented in public programs supported by the Pennsylvania Humanities Council, a statewide organization funded partially by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

As Shopes (1993) observes, making interview materials public becomes a way for these mothers to assert the value of their lives against the cultural forces that devalue or fail to understand them. The process also helps these mothers recognize their strengths as women who have taken the actions necessary to ensure that their families survive economically. Listening to their own stories and knowing that others are also interested in hearing them can help migrant mothers develop the self-esteem necessary to play the role of involved parent expected in the mainstream U.S. educational system.

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Appendix

Oral History Outline

The oral history interview was organized into three sections, reflecting the three areas of migrant mothers' lives on which this project focused. The interviewer asked open-ended questions about the topics listed (i.e., "Tell me about your earliest recollections as a child in a farmworker family") to elicit information about migrant mothers' lives in these three areas. The interviewer was also encouraged to explore related topics that interviewees raised.

I. Growing Up As a Child
   A. Name and age
   B. Family name and composition
   C. Where born and raised
   D. Home(s)
   E. Camp life as a child
   F. Family work
      1. How long in farmwork
      2. How long traveling, where traveled to
      3. Kinds of crops picked
      4. Other work
   G. Culture
      1. Ethnic background
      2. Importance of religion
      3. Family traditions, foods
      4. What family did for fun
   H. Relationships between males and females in family
      1. Differences between growing up as little girl rather than little boy in family, culture, camp
   I. Difficulties in dealing with people outside of culture, camp (i.e., experiences with prejudice)
   J. Education
      1. How much, what it was like
      2. Parents' expectations
      3. Mother's expectations as a child and extent met
      4. Interesting educational experiences
   K. Special people who influenced mother when a child

II. Life As an Adult Woman
   A. When/how began working as migrant woman
   B. When/why married (i.e., how met spouse)

C. How many children
   1. Their ages
   2. Whether more or fewer children than expected
   3. How decision made to have children
D. Other members of family
E. Life as an adult woman in culture
   1. Differences from man's life
F. Life as a woman in camp (i.e., responsibilities, what mother does for fun)
   1. Differences from man's life
G. Life as a migrant mother
   1. Differences from migrant father's life
H. Changes seen in lifetime for women/mothers in culture or as migrant
I. Future plans for education, training, or change in jobs
   1. Mother's highest dreams for herself
   2. What would she like life to be like for herself

III. Life for Mother's Children
A. How children's lives differ from mother's life as a child
   1. Traveling
   2. Education
   3. Opportunities
   4. Camp life
B. Mother's hopes for her children
   1. Educational expectations
   2. Traveling expectations
   3. Job expectations
   4. Marriage/family expectations
C. Difficulties children have as migrant children outside of culture, camp
   1. Adjustment to school
   2. Experiences of prejudice
   3. How mother helps children deal with difficulties
D. Mother's highest dreams for children
   1. What mother would like life to be like for them
   2. How mother will help them achieve this